

# Putting the Action in Advocacy



New designs to inspire people to send letters to their representatives

**Citizens' Committee for Children of New York (CCC) is a non-partisan, non-profit child advocacy organization that works to advance policies and programs that benefit New York children and families. Recently, CCC's E-Action Network has experienced diminishing participation in its "Take Action" online letter-writing campaigns. ideas42's NYC Behavioral Design Center partnered with CCC to uncover the behavioral barriers to the E-Action Network's engagement and offered recommendations to motivate advocates to send more letters to state and city leaders.**

## Summary

For the past 75 years, **Citizens' Committee for Children of New York (CCC)** has promoted public discourse, educated the public, and identified and promoted practical solutions that would ensure every New York City child is healthy, housed, educated and safe. The organization maintains numerous initiatives, such as advocacy workshops and events, leadership courses, youth after-school programs, informative webinars, and an online E-Action Network. The E-Action Network drives the organization's "Take Action" efforts—namely, calling and letter-writing campaigns to state and city leaders.

CCC sends "Take Action" requests to an email list of approximately 12 thousand subscribed advocates. Each email request contains a description of the policy or program of focus, as well as a call to action—specifically, to send a letter to one's city or state leaders to either protect or support that policy or program. To send the letters, supporters can simply click on a red "Take Action" button, which redirects them to a dedicated page on CCC's website. This page includes a pre-written letter and a list of the elected officials the letter will be sent to. All the supporter needs to do is fill out some basic personal information (see below) and click "Take Action."

### Highlights

- ▶ Outreach campaigns must be directly informed by the behaviors and interests of recipients.
- ▶ A lack of evidence on the impact of advocacy work can discourage engagement.
- ▶ Simplifying and streamlining communication makes it easier for supporters to participate.

**Figure 1:** Example of Take Action form and pre-written letter

**Subject:** Make the Child Tax Credit Permanent  
**Message:**


Dear Senator/Representative,

Even before the pandemic, there were 700,000 children living in poverty in New York State of whom nearly 400,000 live in New York City. As existing disparities have only grown more exaggerated since March 2020, the need for relief for families cannot be overstated.


The expansion of the Child Tax Credit in the Build Back Better Act is a monumental step in our nation's efforts to combat child poverty. Congressional leaders took action to enhance the child tax credit this year, providing monthly payments to families as well as increasing the credit, raising the age limit and ensuring that families with the lowest incomes would receive benefits. The enhanced child tax credit is estimated to

*Characters remaining: 1666*

**This email will be delivered to 3 recipients:**



**Sen. Charles Ellis  
Schumer**  
D - US Senator  
(202) 224-6542



**Sen. Kirsten Elizabeth  
Rutnik Gillibrand**  
D - US Senator  
(202) 224-4451

*Federal, state, and municipal data powered by KnowWho, LLC, a Phone2Action company.*

[Take Action](#)

Please fill out your contact information to be connected with your representatives.

First Name\*  Last Name\*

Email Address\*

Address, line 1\*

City\*  State\*  Zip Code\*

I'd like to receive updates from this organization

Some additional information is requested by your representative:

Title\*

Home Phone\*

Would you like a response?\*

As other forms of advocacy were curtailed by the pandemic, CCC relied more heavily on its E-Action Network. Unfortunately, over the past year the organization observed that E-Action Members became less and less likely to submit “Take Action” letters. Likewise, new member sign-ups and participation among existing members declined.

To increase the engagement of E-Action Network members at this pivotal time, CCC asked the ideas42's NYC Behavioral Design Center (BDC) to provide insights about the behavioral barriers to "Take Action" participation and propose solutions. We applied a behavioral lens to the problem and provided behaviorally informed recommendations and campaign email templates.

## Identifying behavioral barriers to participation

We worked with CCC to better understand what motivates people to submit "Take Action" letters, as well as understand the behavioral barriers that can discourage participation in the E-Action Network. Our work began with in-depth discussions with members of the organization's outreach and engagement team and policy team, which gave us a better understanding of the Network's goals and how it has grown over the years. We then conducted a robust analysis of CCC's email marketing data, which revealed useful insights such as:

- ▶ CCC sends emails inconsistently throughout the calendar year. During the New York State legislative session (January–June), the organization sends an email, on average, every 2.5 days. During the rest of the calendar year, CCC sends an average of one email every 10.5 days.
- ▶ CCC most frequently sends "Take Action" emails related to the state budget (36% of all emails in 2021). However, the emails with "budget" in the subject line receive below-average open rates (12%). Subject lines that mention specific programs or services (14%), as well as those that mention immigration (18%) or healthcare (14%), receive higher engagement rates.
- ▶ Contrary to conventional wisdom, longer subject lines do not seem to affect open rates. We found no correlation between subject line length and open rates.

Next, in collaboration with CCC's outreach and engagement team, we sent out a survey to the entire E-Action Network to get a better understanding of members' communication preferences and interests. Survey results revealed:

- ▶ Only 20% of survey respondents currently interact with the organization's emails on a weekly basis. More survey respondents (48%) only open emails approximately every one to two months.
- ▶ Only 20% of survey respondents wish to receive a CCC email more than once a week. Most supporters wish to hear from them either once a week (37%) or once a month (30%).
- ▶ When asked what they open CCC emails to learn about, only slightly more than half of survey respondents wish to hear about "Take Action" campaigns (57%), whereas 72% want to hear about the organization's courses & workshop offerings.

Finally, this quantitative and survey work informed a dozen interviews with current CCC board members, active E-Action Network participants, and recently inactive participants. Through a series of 45-minute video conversations, we asked participants about their current engagement with CCC and the E-Action Network, as well as their thoughts on the "Take Action" campaign content, formatting, delivery channels, and impact

on policy. Our interviews confirmed that E-Action Network members find the “Take Action” letters very quick and easy to send, and members have a deep passion for the issues that CCC advocates for.

Overall, our research revealed several important behavioral barriers that can lead Network members to procrastinate or avoid sending letters to their elected officials.

**1. Discouraging mental models: “I don’t think they hurt, but I do not believe they help ... It feels like I just keep writing letters and nothing changes.”**

E-Action Network members may form a negative mental model (or expectation) of how helpful these letter-writing campaigns are because they lack information on the letters’ impact. As a result, E-Action Network members question whether their “Take Action” letters make a difference or have impact.

**2. Email overload and salience: “There are a lot of emails coming from CCC, and it’s a lot to read.”**

CCC sends many emails to its email database throughout the calendar year. The distinctiveness of each campaign is not salient to the E-Action Network, so they may not recognize that they are being asked to complete a new action each time. For example, during the busy New York State legislative session, the organization sends an email every three days on average. These communications often look similar, and most of the requested actions are similar: send a letter.

**3. Limited attention and procrastination: “It’s unnecessary—get straight to the point. It’s too much.”**

We observed that many “Take Action” emails are jam-packed with information on the campaign and the policy, program, or issue being addressed. For busy E-Action Network members, this information overload may be too much to process in a short time, leading to inaction and/or procrastination.

**4. Limited personalization doesn’t capture attention or motivate action: “You have to tailor them and get straight to the point.”**

It’s also possible that recipients do not perceive the emails as directed at or relevant to them personally. This lack of relevance and insufficient personalization can further contribute to inaction.

## Redesign and outreach recommendations

Based on our research and discussions with CCC’s senior leadership, we created a new email template for the organization to use in future “Take Action” campaigns (see Figure 2 below). We created an example email using the template that calls for action to make the Child Tax Credit expansion permanent. The template streamlines information, makes campaign deadlines salient, and highlights the impact that outreach to policymakers can have. Finally, the template adopts several behaviorally informed formatting strategies to draw the reader’s eye to the most important information, including why this issue matters to CCC, the deadline, and the desired action.

**Figure 2:** Redesigned “Take Action” campaign email



In addition to the redesigned email template, the BDC provided a series of specific, behaviorally informed recommendations for CCC to apply to its future communications and outreach efforts, including:

- ▶ **Design for limited attention.** CCC supporters are busy and struggle with email overload. Going forward, CCC emails should be formatted to (1) capture attention, (2) allow for skimming, and (3) draw attention specifically to key information and actions. We recommend that CCC be more selective about its use of headers, colors, and graphics, and use these formatting tools as ways to highlight and organize the information presented.
- ▶ **Set deadlines.** Deadlines motivate action because they help people prioritize a task amid all their other responsibilities, and because they create a sense of urgency. Even an arbitrary deadline is an effective tool to encourage action. Thus, we recommend that CCC consider setting campaign goals and deadlines for each Take Action email (e.g. “Help us meet our goal of sending Chuck Schumer 150 letters by this Friday”).

- ▶ **Highlight the impact.** Few of the “Take Action” campaign emails, newsletters, or other communications we reviewed highlighted past campaign successes, impact, or outcomes. To reinforce the importance of sending letters to representatives, we recommend that CCC find and share the stories of people affected by featured policies or programs, since people respond more strongly to stories than to facts alone. In addition, we recommend that the organization find and share quotes from elected officials demonstrating how they were affected by these letters—especially if it applies to the current campaign. And, of course, share campaign wins whenever possible.
- ▶ **Send reminders.** Simple reminders are a powerful tool for combatting the impact of limited attention on behavior, particularly when they are personalized. Since CCC has access to subscribers’ email activity data, we recommend using that data to create targeted reminders to send to those who failed to “Take Action” within 3-5 days of the requested send date.
- ▶ **Foster a community around letter writing.** One major insight that emerged during our interviews was that, due to the lack of in-person CCC gatherings during the pandemic, E-Action Network members felt disengaged from the organization. Supporters expressed a strong desire to connect with each other. We recommend the organization brainstorm ways to create more opportunities for E-Action Network members to connect and interact. Fostering a group identity around CCC’s advocacy work can foster a shared sense of dedication to the organization’s “Take Action” efforts.
- ▶ **Make Take Action participation visible and leverage social pressure.** Currently there is no way for E-Action Members to share their support of certain campaigns, nor does the organization report on current campaign progress. We recommended a number of strategies to leverage social pressure to persuade more people to submit letters. These strategies include publicizing the number of people taking actions (or total letters sent) to generate positive momentum, and encouraging social sharing by including language such as, “Already sent your letters? Send one more: Please forward this email to a friend so we can spread the word.” In addition, we recommend installing a social media plug-in that will allow people to post their “Take Action” participation to social media, similar to a digital “I Voted” sticker.

## Takeaways & what’s next

CCC is now conducting A/B testing of the redesigned email template against a conventionally designed version, comparing letter submission rates for each version. If test results indicate that the redesigned version is more effective, it can serve as a template for future “Take Actions”. In addition, CCC staff plan to begin segmenting the organization’s email contact lists in response to findings from the participant survey. Going forward, CCC will continue to monitor its digital engagement metrics to determine how to further tailor “Take Action” communication and messaging strategies. They also expect to apply a number of the strategies we recommended to other CCC communication campaigns.

In order to successfully mobilize online advocacy—in NYC and beyond—outreach campaigns must be directly informed by the behaviors and interests of recipients. This project exemplifies the power of behavioral science to inform and enhance grassroots civic participation. In particular, it highlights the importance of making advocacy activities feel easy, accessible, relevant, and impactful.

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